

Killing the Pig

'Killing the Pig' is quite a different poem, which highlights Montague's originality as well as his care for all creation. Montague takes a typical farmyard activity of killing a pig and attempts to portray the emotional trauma for the animal. Through the use of colloquial, everyday language, Montague ponders on the inhumanity of slaughtering a pig, and forces the reader to do the same. By isolating the opening line, "**The noise**", Montague focuses our attention on the cries of the innocent pig and somewhat transports us to this farm yard scene. Montague gives a detailed description of the animal being sent to slaughter, which emphasises the empathy he has for the animal and evokes the same feelings within me, "**He was pulled out, squealing, / an iron cleek sunk in the roof/ of his mouth**". His use of descriptive language clearly portrays to the reader that in this battle between farmer and pig, Montague most definitely supports the pig. The language in this poem in general is quite matter-of-fact. However, by putting the second stanza in brackets, Montague adds more feeling and a more personal element to his words, "**(Don't say they are not intelligent...)**". This display of emotion and feelings engages the reader with the poet and helps to convince us of his views. The poet also seems quite defensive in tone, further revealing his support for the pig. Montague creates an image of the pig's "**little trotters**", which highlights its innocence and vulnerability, evoking a sense of compassion for the pig within me. The use of comparison to aid our understanding of the horror of the scream is incredibly effective and sends chills down my spine, "**the brain-chilling persistence of an electric saw, / scrap being crushed**". The poet uses a short three-word line to capture the essence of the pig's scream, "**Piercing & absolute**". The shortness of the line dramatizes its effect and brings the sound to life, emphasising Montague's horror at the animal's fate. Montague again makes me ponder on the cruelty of killing the pig with the line, "**Then a full stop.**". The assonance and punctuation in this line slows the pace of the poem and forces me to reflect on Montague's message – the pig is much more than just meat to be sold. The slaughtering of the pig is now complete, and with this comes a change in the atmosphere/tone of the poem. As the poem comes to an end, the tone loses all feeling and instead becomes somewhat factual and unattached, "**the carcass is hung up**". However, I feel that this informative tone is merely a cover for the helplessness Montague feels in his attempts to convince others to have compassion for the pig. Montague's language remains casual and conversational, yet he still manages to create a most

disturbing image of **“A child is given/ the bladder to play with”**. This is quite shocking, yet it accurately portrays the reality of farm life and the idea that slaughtering the pig is a regular job. The final lines of the poem create quite an eerie atmosphere, **“the walls of the farmyard/ still hold that scream, / are built around it”**, and have a lasting impact on me as a reader. These chilling lines force me to see the fate of the pig from Montague’s point of view and develop a sensitivity towards the ruthless killing of farm animals.

The Locket

Montague’s poem ‘The Locket’ discusses the poet’s troubled relationship with his mother. Like many of his poems, ‘The Locket’ is deeply personal and Montague openly displays his emotions to the reader, which allows me to connect with him. Through my study of the poet, I have learnt that he was born a boy when his mother **“longed for a girl”** and was also born **“the wrong way around”**, something which he has carried the shame of for his whole life. I believe that ‘The Locket’ is Montague’s attempt to make sense of his relationship with his mother and to gain peace of mind. The opening lines of the poem are reminiscent of a nursery rhyme, **“Sing a last song/ for the lady who has gone”**, highlighting what was missing from Montague’s childhood. The poet’s language is startlingly blunt at this point in the poem, which shows his lack of understanding at his mother’s decision not to care for him, **“fertile source of guilt and pain”**. This blunt language helps me to understand Montague’s thought process and fully engage with the poem. Montague’s pain is incredibly evident in his quoting of what his mother has told him about his birth, **“The worst birth in the annals of Brooklyn”**, highlighting how this pain is something he has carried with him his whole life. I initially feel anger towards this woman who neglected her son, **“So you never nursed me”**, but as the poem progresses, Montague’s illustrative language gives me an insight into his mother’s own struggles and enables me too to forgive her. By quoting his mother, **“when poverty comes through the door/ love flies up the chimney”**, Montague effectively incorporates her spirit into the poem and shows an understanding of the hard and impoverished life she lived. This quote also allows me to somewhat know his mother and helps me to connect with her life story, not just Montague’s. Montague’s compassion towards his mother continues to be seen when he describes his eager attempts to win her affections, **“cycled down/ to court you like a young man”**. The use of a simile to compare himself to **“a young man”** portrays Montague’s innocence and evokes a sense of sympathy for him within me. Although the poet’s tone is quite light and playful, his acknowledgement of the fact that it was him who made

the effort in their relationship, **“might never have known me/ if I had not”**, reveals his underlying feelings of neglect and hurt. I personally find this desperately sad and am somewhat shocked that his mother did not make the same effort to get to know her son. The poet’s use of verbs, **“teasingly untying your apron/ drinking by the fire, yarning”**, adds pace to the poem, as well as portraying his keenness to develop a relationship and his readiness to forgive his mother. Not only does Montague come to understand his mother, he also expresses a sympathy for her and the poverty-riddled life she lived by using narrative language to create an image of her past, **“lovely Molly, the belle of your small town/ landed up mournful and chill”**. This backstory to his mother’s past gives me an insight into her history and heightens my understanding of her life decisions, which up to this point, I had found quite incomprehensible. However, despite their improved relationship, **“I start to get fond of you, John”**, the lack of closeness between the two is evident in the fact that he refers to her as **“Molly”** opposed to as ‘Mum’ or another term of endearment. As a reader, I personally find that the sense of distance between the two of them is undeniable. In the final stanza, Montague describes his mother as a **“mysterious blessing”**, creating the image of a vulnerable woman who wants to be loved, yet struggles to give her heart to others. The soft sounds in this line eases the pain felt by the poet and shows his understanding of her own inner turmoil. My own opinion of Montague’s mother is changed to one of compassion, yet pity, as he tells us how she **“wore an oval locket”** with a picture of him inside of it. While Montague’s mother was unable to verbally express her love for her son, the poet effectively use language to come to terms with the neglect he experienced and comprehend his mother’s motives. By addressing his mother directly throughout, **“around your neck, / you wore”**, Montague creates a very personal and raw poem, which heightens the emotive power of his language for me as a reader. Through exposing the reader to his personal life and relationships, Montague convinces me to have empathy for his mother. I found this to be a very emotional and somewhat heart-breaking piece of poetry, yet I felt that the sheer honesty that Montague expresses throughout helped me to understand him both as a poet and as a human being.

All Legendary Obstacles

“All Legendary Obstacles” is not what I would describe as a typical love poem, yet it perfectly captures the anticipation and emotions associated with budding relationships. The first stanza is full of descriptive images that make up **“All legendary obstacles [that] lay between/ Us”**. These

images somewhat transport me to the location of the poem and allow me to participate in Montague's love story as an onlooker. Broad vowels lengthen the line **"the long imaginary plain"** and allow the poet to convert the distance between him and his lover into words. Onomatopoeia is used to describe the **"monstrous ruck of mountains"** and the **"hissing drift of winter rain"**, increasing the images' appeal and effectiveness for me as a reader. While Montague seems to be describing the physical barriers between him and his love, I also see these as a metaphor for the emotional obstacles that couples must overcome to survive long distance relationships. The picturesque images created through the poet's use of illustrative language allow Montague to create a peaceful atmosphere and add a mystical quality to the poem, a quality which is also evident in all romantic relationships. I find this sense of serenity most appealing and it allows me to lose myself in the poem. The tone somewhat changes to one of tension and unease in the second stanza as Montague **"waited, shifting/ Nervously from station to bar"**. This change of tone evokes the same feelings within me as I anxiously wait to see what fate has in store for the couple's relationship. The use of enjambment mimics the poet's own pacing actions as he waits anxiously for the return of his lover. Montague openly expresses his anxiety about the reunion by referencing his **"shifting"**, and this openness allows me to connect with and have empathy for him. I personally find the setting of the train station to be a most brilliant poetry technique as the transience in the train station, **"I saw another train sail/ By"**, perfectly captures the transience experienced in relationships. One of the most distinctive features of Montague's poetry is his honesty, and this is incredibly evident in his description of the couple's reunion, **"I was too blind with rain/ And doubt to speak"**. He does not attempt to cover up their apparent awkwardness, which allows me to connect with him and see a more human side to the poet. I personally find the honesty with which Montague expresses his feelings quite unique, yet most effective as it evokes feelings of compassion within me and furthers my admiration for him. The contrast between his lover, **"pale"**, and **"the negro porter's lamp"** adds light and shade to the image of the meeting and gives it a certain cinematic quality. This image reminds me of an old-fashioned movie scene and I think this effectively portrays to the reader Montague's thoughts on his relationship being of mesmeric quality. In the final stanza Montague acknowledges the hardship endured by his lover as a result of the long-distance relationship, **"You have been travelling for days"**. Like in so many of his poems, Montague here shows his ability to connect and empathise with others through deep, meaningful poetry, a quality which I have utmost admiration for. The simple image of an old lady watching the couple **"who marked/ A neat circle on the glass/ With her glove"** as the train pulled away into **"wet darkness"** is the perfect end for the poem and stayed with me long after I had finished reading it. This image perfectly captures the idea that the couple are in their own world and everyone else is a mere onlooker, just as I too become an onlooker on Montague's

relationship through reading the poem. Montague brings old fashioned romance alive through this final image and reminds me of the deep emotional attachment between couples, **“still unable to speak”**. I found this poem to be quite thought provoking on the themes of love and relationships as it gave me a new insight into the true feelings experienced in a relationship. I learnt that love doesn't have to be perfect to be beautiful.

The Cage

Similar to his poem 'The Locket', Montague's poem 'The Cage' sees the poet attempt to understand his father's past, as well as his own relationship with the man who gave him life. The changing tones throughout the poem help to portray to me the idea that relationships are always changing. The brutally honest opening lines somewhat prepare us for the poem and immediately set the bleak, pessimistic mood, **“My father, the least happy/ man I have known”**. I personally found such openness to be almost humorous as it revealed to me that even in his familiar relationships, Montague does not attempt to cover up the truth. Montague is uncompromising in his description of a man whose **“face/ retained the pallor/ of those who work underground”**. This ghostly image gives me a clear understanding of not only his father's physical appearance but gives me an insight into what sort of man he was. While descriptive, his language is nonetheless quite factual, showing little emotion or attachment. The poet displays little compassion for his father and seems to be quite critical of **“the lost years”** he spent in Brooklyn **“listening to a subway/ shudder the earth”**. The lack of empathy Montague seems to have for his father leads me to feel somewhat sorry for the man as he clearly led a very difficult life, and not even his own son was able to profess an understanding of this. The sound of the train's **“shudder”** to me seems to symbolize Montague's own shuddering as he reflects on his father's bleak past. By referring to his father as **“a traditional Irishman”**, Montague enforces his emigrant status. As an Irish person myself, this reference to Ireland helps to engage me in the poem. The poet describes his father as being **“released”** from work, creating the image of a dull and unsatisfactory work life. Again, I can't help but feel pity for the father, yet I've no doubt that this wasn't Montague's intention. Montague's factual tone quickly changes to one of disgust when he discusses his father's pastime of drinking **“neat whiskey”** until he was completely intoxicated, **“brute oblivion”**. Although I recognize that these references to alcoholism are intended to give me a clearer image of his father's character, they are not something I appreciated being included

in the poem. I feel that they reinforce the already held stereotype that Irish people drink too much and are somewhat mocking of the Irish mentality towards alcohol. However, this vulgar description emphasises Montague's disgust at his father and reveals to us that he has no sympathy for this man. The tone again changes to one of admiration in the third stanza and his father's strength of character is revealed, **"picked himself/ up, most mornings"**. The run one lines highlight how his father kept going, despite the curse of a hangover he undoubtedly endured. I appreciate this more favourable outlook on Montague's father's character as I have come to feel quite sympathetic of him. Montague uses alliteration, **"most mornings"**, which adds pace and an upbeat tone to the poem. The reference to religion in the third stanza, **"belled by St Teresa's church"**, greatly contrasts Montague's father's somewhat sacrilegious that is described in the previous stanza. In my opinion, the purpose of this contrast is to show that there are two sides to every person and by **"extending his smile"** Montague's father believed he could hide his less civilised attributes. The scene then changes from the hustle and bustle of Brooklyn to that of rural Tyrone, **"across fields of Garvaghey"**, when the father and son are reunited after nineteen years of separation. I personally think that this barren, empty landscape represents the lack of substance to this father-son relationship. The **"bend on the road"** that Montague talks of portrays to me that the nature of their relationship has changed direction and things between them cannot go back to the way they were. Montague uses nature imagery to describe how the physical landscape has stayed the same, **"still sheltered/ primroses"**, but the father-son relationship has not, **"did not smile in/ the shared complicity/ of a dream"**. This idea of change and permanence is a feature present in many of Montague's poems and is something which I find to be quite thought provoking. There is undoubtedly a hint of disappointment in Montague's tone, revealing that despite his sometimes hard appearance, Montague genuinely cares for his father, which I am glad to see. This human disappointment helps to engage me in the poem as it is both relatable and reveals the poet's softer side. The final stanza returns us to the scene of the gloomy Brooklyn subway, where the memories of his father's work play on Montague's mind, **"I see his bald head behind/ the bars of the small booth"**. Through this flashback, I can see the strong impact that his father had on his life, as the man is regularly in his thoughts. The final lines of the poem are both dramatic and thought provoking, **"an old car/ accident beating on his/ ghostly forehead"**. I cannot help but wonder what became of his father and a sense of intrigue is evoked within me. This detailed description creates a disturbing image of a suffering man with the weight of regrets and mistakes weighing on his mind. This image somewhat shocked me and stayed with me long after I had finished reading the poem.

Like Dolmens Round My Childhood

Montague's poem 'Like Dolmens Round My Childhood' reads like a story, making it very engaging and memorable. Each stanza tells a different story of a character from Montague's youth, and as a reader I become lost in the world of his childhood. By using irregular rhyme, Montague seems to express that his neighbours weren't perfect like a perfectly rhymed poem, but they had their strong points. I find this to be quite a heart-warming metaphor, and a beautiful tribute to the people who helped to shape the person Montague became. Each person is described in intricate detail, "**sang to himself / a broken song without tune**", highlighting Montague's observant nature and his deep emotional investment in these people. This display of emotion is contagious, and I too come to feel for these people that Montague describes. Montague's sympathy for some of these people is also evident through his blunt retelling of the shocking things that happened in this remote town, "**Mattress and money-box torn and searched**". This horrifies me as a reader and grabs my attention, pulling me further into the poem. The poet focuses on the goodness in other people, even though he may have been alone in his views, "**Reputed a witch, all I could find/ Was her lonely need to deride**". This reveals to me the understanding and empathy Montague displays towards others. This inclusion of his own feelings also contributes to making the poem more personal, and more appealing to me as a reader. The poet uses language to create vivid visual imagery of the Irish countryside, particularly in the third stanza, when he tells the story of his blind neighbours, "**heather bells bloomed, clumps of foxglove/ All were blind**". The beautiful imagery of the countryside described through illustrative language appeals to the senses and evokes a sense of peace within me. I also find the description of the beautiful landscape alongside that of his blind neighbours to be somewhat ironic, however I believe that painting with words what his neighbours cannot see for themselves is Montague's subtle way of sympathising with their misfortune. Again, Montague uses his gift with words to reach out to and empathise with others. Montague seems to express a sympathy for those in his town who had been unlucky in love, "**she fell asleep/ Over love stories**", showing how he can relate to the dreams of others. The inclusion of "**love stories**" gives a fairy-tale-like quality to the poem and makes Montague's childhood seem like one out of a child's book, full of supernatural and mythical creatures. I enjoy this mystical element to the poem and find I am somewhat able to lose myself in the poem's spiritual quality. The poet also presents the reader with issues that were current at the time he was growing up, such as the Protestant/Catholic divide in Northern Ireland, "**Wild Billy Eagleson married a Catholic servant girl**". The fact that Montague was so young when the Troubles occurred, yet he has such acute knowledge of their implications, "**Forsaken by both creeds**", shows me the deep

understanding the poet has and has had of other people's suffering. The historical references also serve to making the poem educationally beneficial for me as a modern reader. Despite his evident fondness for his childhood neighbours, "**Like dolmens round my childhood**", it becomes clear that Montague also pitied their isolated existence. This pity is evident when Montague tells us the tragic tale of their passing, "**they were found by neighbours, / Silent keepers of a smokeless hearth**", which effectively captures the harsh reality of life for the elderly in ancient Ireland. I find this reality to be quite heart breaking and cannot help but develop a profound sadness about the isolation in rural Ireland. I am also forced to ponder on the thought of does this neglect still exist, and if so, what can be done to put an end to it? The sibilance in this line softens the tone, portraying Montague's sympathy amidst his anger at his neighbours' neglect. In the final stanza, the poet shows a knowledge of the way of life in ancient Ireland, from the superstitions, "**The rune and chant**" to the "**Fomorian fierceness of family and local feud**". This paints a rather bleak and pessimistic view of the Ireland of Montague's childhood, and I am personally very glad that I did not grow up at this time. Montague's own experience, "**I was reared by her bedside**", adds authenticity to the poem and aids his portrayal of a society worthy of compassion and sympathy. The isolation of the last line increases its dramatic effect, "**Into that dark permanence of ancient forms**". This line perfectly sums up the inevitable: the only permanent thing in our lives is death, and I find it to be a thought provoking ending to a historical, yet personal poem.

A Welcoming Party

'A Welcoming Party' is the most disturbing of Montague's poems that I have studied and for this reason it stands out in my memory. The opening line of the poem is in German, "**Wie war das möglich?**", meaning 'How was it possible?'. As a reader, this immediately grabs my attention and gives me an idea as to what to expect in this poem. Although I was prepared for a war poem, 'A Welcoming Party' doesn't merely describe the fighting and violence but describes the gruesome effects of war on the regular human being. The poet details a visit to the cinema, in which his eyes were opened to the cruelty of war. His use of simile to describe the prisoners' movements, "**nests of bodies hatching like eggs**" creates a vivid image in my mind, as well as portraying the poet's own feelings of shock and horror at what met his eyes. Equating the prisoners' malnourished limbs to "**Flickered insect like hands and legs**" allows me to fully grasp the detrimental effect that this war had on their physical health. By comparing the prisoners' "**ululation**" to "**Children**

conjugating the verb ‘to die’”, Montague reminds me that these prisoners are real people, like myself, who should be at school learning verbs instead of being trapped in a concentration camp. I am appalled at such a disturbing reality, but this helps me to put the prisoners’ suffering into context in terms of my own life. This increases the effect this poem had on me, as well as showing the poet’s own understanding of the pain suffered. The Jews’ helplessness is displayed through the oxymoron of **“One clamoured mutely of love”**, emphasising how their cries of help are not heard. I cannot help but have a profound sympathy for those who suffered during the war, as well as feeling somewhat guilty for my own fortune of living in a war-free country. Like in many of his poems, Montague not only displays compassion, but there is also a hint of anger in his tone. He appears to be attacking Irish society’s failed response to World War II, mocking our attempts to help by giving the bare minimum, **“Claiming the small change of our souls”**. The simple style in which Montague expresses his opinion is most effective and compels me to agree with him. By telling how some prisoners **“smiled at us as protectors”**, the poet displays an ability to recognise how even though these prisoners had lost everything, they were still clinging to hope. This image pulls at my heart strings and further forces me to agree with Montague’s view that Ireland didn’t do enough to help during the war. Montague’s evident sense of compassion and guilt is contagious and evokes the same feelings within me. The poet portrays a sense of helplessness when he describes the nation’s feeble attempts to help in giving **“Our parochial brand of innocence”**. The feeling of helplessness in this line highlights the deep effect the war film had on Montague and his ability to empathise with the pain of others. While Montague displays an abundance of compassion and empathy for the Jewish prisoners, the complete opposite is seen in his depiction of the Irish people’s submissive response. He appears to be mocking Ireland’s neutrality, **“always at the periphery of incident/ Gave my childhood its Irish dimension”** and am I both shocked and impressed by the passion in his feelings. The harsh language in this line emphasises his disgust and lack of forgiveness towards the Irish nations’ failed response. The final stanza sees Montague take on a self-critical tone as he discusses his own submissive response to **“the meaning of total war”** by **“belt[ing] a football through the air”**. Alas, it appears to me that Montague is able to display compassion for others through his poetry but is unforgiving in his judgement of his own actions. This also highlights how quickly we forget about the horrors of war when they aren’t happening in our own country, which is a regrettable human flaw. Before studying this poem, I was always of the opinion that a neutral stance was a country’s best option in times of war, however Montague’s vividly clear portrayal of the suffering endured by the prisoners, as well as his anger at the Irish response, has changed my view.

Opening

John Montague uses language which is both beautiful and emotive throughout his poetry, and through this he shows great understanding and compassion towards others. Montague's poetry is deeply personal and through studying his work, I feel I have come to understand him both as a person and as a poet. Montague's distinctive style seems to largely revolve around comprehending the past and providing the reader with an insight into his innermost thoughts. Although the majority of his poems have simple titles, Montague does not fall short in expressing a strong opinion on the matter at hand. Through his poetry, he expresses a connection with others and encourages the reader to do the same.

Personal Engagement

John Montague's poetry had a profound effect on me. His use of descriptive and engaging language appealed to my senses as well as tugging on my heart strings. As a poet, he displays a great openness and understanding for the position of others and has inspired me to do the same. The historical insights he offers in many of his poems offer me different perspectives and have changed my opinion about many past events. However, above all, Montague's work is honest and personal. His painfully raw poetry allows me to form a connection with him as a reader and to see the world through his eyes. Upon Montague's death, C.K Williams remarked that "John Montague is a poet of enormous lyrical gifts, but he has as well an acute and dramatic sense of history". In my opinion this perfectly sums up what I experienced while studying Montague's poetry – historical and personal truths embedded in emotional and thought-provoking language. I thoroughly enjoyed studying Montague's poetry and found it to be a very worthwhile experience.